

Panthers Plotted Arson, Murder of Police, Officer Tells Hearing

Witness Testifies Informant Reported Exposition Blvd. Headquarters of Militants Was Heavily Fortified, Armed

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Black Panthers planned to kill police officers by starting fires near their Exposition Blvd. headquarters and shooting at the officers when they and firemen responded, an officer testified at a preliminary hearing Tuesday.

Officer Gary M. Derenia, first witness called in the hearing of Black Panthers arrested during raids on Panther headquarters last month, said he learned of the plot from a man who lived near the secondary headquarters at 1100½ W. Exposition Blvd.

Derenia said an informant told him the building had been heavily fortified, including sandbags at the windows.

Visited Premises Several Times

The informant reportedly had visited the premises several times and said he had seen numerous rifles, shotguns, pistols and homemade bombs in the building.

The Panthers also allegedly told him "they were going to kill some police officers."

"When they are ready they are going to set fire to some buildings . . . when fire and police units responded they were going to open fire on them from the headquarters," Derenia reported the informant as saying.

Derenia was one of 10 officers brought into court by Dep. Dist. Atty. Stephen S. Trott to prove that the Panthers should be tried for conspiracy to commit murder.

The first day's testimony was devoted to background information

about the reported fortification of various Panther buildings and threats made against policemen.

Derenia said he had been threatened by one of the Panthers on another occasion, "He told me to tell my pig friends that any pigs who tried to go into the Panther building was going to be shot."

Derenia and officer Barry H. Staggs testified that at another time a man pointed a rifle at them from the doorway of the building.

Forced Out of Building

Lt. Ted Morton, acting commander of Newton Division, told of being forced out of the main Panther building at 4115 S. Central Ave. at gunpoint.

Morton said he entered the building Nov. 20 to speak to the Panthers about an excessively noisy loudspeaker and was confronted by a man with a gun.

"I said, 'I'm a police officer. I would like to talk to you about the loudspeaker.' . . . He said, 'Get out or I'll shoot.' A second person picked up a shotgun."

Morton said he repeated the statement about being a police officer and wanting to speak with the men, but the defendant "pointed the gun toward my midsection and indicated he was going to count three then shoot."

"He said one, two, . . . and just before he said three, I said, 'Cool it. I'll leave,'" Morton told the court.

Dennis D. Obert, a motor officer, told of being stopped at the front door of the same headquarters by a

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man with a gun when he attempted to apprehend a fleeing traffic violator who ran into the building.

All of these incidents were previous to the Dec. 8 raid on the Panther headquarters on S. Central Ave., according to testimony.

Six other officers testified of seeing fortification work done on the Panther buildings, which apparently began about mid-October, and of threats made against them by Panthers.

The 10 officers were witnesses in a hearing which is getting under way after a week's delay on preliminary matters.

One was a charge made Thursday by defense attorney Leo Branton Jr.

that the jail facilities where the Panthers are kept are cold, have no hot water and are rat infested.

Municipal Judge James H. Brown, at the defense's request, inspected the facilities Friday and reported in court Tuesday that he found the facilities adequate, in fact, better than those of most prisoners.

Branton replied, "I don't doubt that you were not able to see the rats when you were there during the daytime because rats only come out at night. So the defendants have brought some rats into court for you to see."

At this point some of the Panthers held up four dead mice they had apparently killed in their cells.

"Those aren't rats."

They're mice," the judge judge and the defense attorney agreeing to allow it to be reflected in the record that the defendants held up some "rodents."

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